REGIONAL PUBLISHING AND NATIONAL CULTURE

By Joseph A. Brandt

HE importance of university presses in American life was perhaps not thoroughly demonstrated until the current business depression got under way. For without them, publication of learned books in the United States would for all practical purposes have ceased. Commercial publishers, confronted with diminishing sales and mindful of the large stocks they already had on hand, eliminated first from their lists serious nonfiction books with limited or long-time sales possibilities. This left the publication of such books, assuming they were worthwhile,

almost solely in the hands of the university presses. These world-wide classrooms of the universities had been suffering from the depression also; and it was not an easy matter, with budgets reduced from 25 to 40 per cent, for them to carry on their regular programs, much less take care of the additional load thrown on them by the policies of the commercial publishers.

The limited-sales book (I do not like the term "scholarly") had always had a place on the lists of commercial publishers, either for the sake of prestige or because the publisher recognized his social function—and, fortunately for our national culture, publishers who acknowledge their responsibility to society are in the majority. Some publishers did continue to issue a few serious non-fiction books in spite of financial troubles, but in reducing the number of titles on their lists they usually had to cut most heavily into the serious non-fiction group.

The university presses are hardened veterans of the business of publishing and marketing limited-sales books. They do not hope to find in every book a best-seller, although, frankly, they would give a right arm to have one. They look at a book as a contribution to knowledge; they measure it in terms of sales over a period of years. They are accustomed to the charge, brought by the reviewers and the bookstores, that they publish only dull and high-priced books. But they feel that this indictment is in the main unjust.

If there is any trend discernible in the publishing policies of the university presses, it is a growing realization that scholars must learn to write the English language as well as to gather facts. In American educational circles many of us, to the great harm of education, have for years proceeded on the theory that research is an end in itself. We have consistently decreased the value of undergraduate study as we have increased emphasis on graduate study. We have insisted on having our candidates for higher degrees dump theses on esoteric subjects into a market already clogged. Some universities even have the temerity to insist that all theses must be published, in whole or in part, though a thesis is rarely a book, and rarely is designed to be one, since it

more often seeks to prove than to inform. Coupled with this demand that theses be published, there has been a growing tendency to require professors to publish books in order to obtain advancement. Thus the university presses have frequently found themselves between the Scylla of esotericism and the Charybdis of the unutterably dull pot-boilers of bored professors.

But the university presses have already begun a process (which university faculties will have to begin sooner or later if our educational system is to exercise a real influence in our cultural life) of distinguishing between the research scholar and the educated man. It is painfully amazing to note the number of scholars with minds of the bank-teller or clerical type who are ignorant of the first principles of composition. They refuse credit to papers handed in by their students because of errors less heinous than are contained in the manuscripts which they themselves write and submit to publishers.

If these so-called scholars had any pride of authorship, any social sense, they would employ ghost writers. The educated man, that is, the real scholar, knows how to fit his subject, however narrow it may be, into the pattern of our culture; he knows how to express himself so that, however limited his audience may be, his readers know what he is about. Scholars of this type who come to mind are Walter Bagehot, Elie Halévy, Graham Wallas, Harold J. Laski, and Charles A. Beard. They combine profound erudition with a humane spirit and urbane writing.

The Yale University Press was perhaps the first to break away from the traditional "scholarly" book. Princeton and Chicago are making strides in that direction. The Oxford University Press has for a number of years had a most adventurous list. The University of North Carolina Press combines vigor with scholarship in its publications. And so the survey might go on. But the task of escaping the deadly embraces of the clerical-minded scholar is not an easy one, especially in those universities where the "thesis racket" is firmly entrenched. It is evident, however, that we shall never arouse public esteem for scholarly writing in America until

we come to judge theses not merely as scholarly exercises, but also as contributions to literature.

From its foundation in 1928, the University of Oklahoma Press has insisted, with varying success, not only that its books must be contributions to the various fields of scholarship, but that they must be readable as well. President William Bennett Bizzell, to whose love of good books the founding of the Press is due, believed that one of the goals of the University Press should be the encouragement of the habit of reading among Oklahomans. Another aim of the Press has been to provide the means of publication for books whose appeal is primarily to Oklahoma and the Southwest, or as we are tempted to say these days, for regional books.

It was fitting that the first book published by the Press should have contained what many people regard as the foundation-stone of the regional movement, the statement of B. A. Botkin in Folk-Say, A Regional Miscellany (published June, 1929), called "The Folk in Literature." Folk-Say was a paper-bound book which carried on its title page the name of the Oklahoma Folk-Lore Society as its publisher. The Society was as nearly non-existent as a society can comfortably be. It had been precariously nourished for years by Dr. Botkin, who dreamed of some day issuing a quarterly to be called Folk-Say. When the Press was projected, he presented his plan. It was finally decided to issue Folk-Say as an annual, but the name of the Press appeared only on the copyright page of the first issue. The Press has developed from an unambitious beginning: at that time it consisted of a venturesome editor fresh from the city-desk of a newspaper, a secretary, and a hardworking and zealous plant superintendent.

The University was ready for the Press. The University of Oklahoma has been a particularly dynamic place, an institution where very few professors grow old mentally—or dare grow old! Since it is a relatively young university, much remains to be done here in every field of intellectual activity; and there are men on the faculty, from the President down, who want to do it. So there was no paucity of good books with which to inaugurate the Press.

The first "contract" book was that of Dr. Howard O. Eaton on The Austrian Philosophy of Values. Like so many books it has been the fortune of the Press to publish, Dr. Eaton's was a pioneer exploration into a neglected field. The second contract book, which preceded Dr. Eaton's in publication, was John Woodworth's delightful play, laid in New Orleans, A Certain Young Widow. The University's theater, The Playhouse, held an annual state play competition, and Mr. Woodworth's play won the award in 1930. His play caused Walter Prichard Eaton to remark that "the new theater in America is on the way."

From those early days of casual publishing has evolved the University Press, with a regular spring and autumn list, and with several definite series of books which have found audiences wider than that of the usual scholarly book. The petroleum and mining series has a professional, rather than scholarly, approach. "The Civilization of the American Indian" series, launched in January, 1932, with Forgotten Frontiers (edited and annotated by Alfred Barnaby Thomas), has proved the most popular venture of the Press. It has included the rarely beautiful Wah'Kon-Tah by John Joseph Mathews and Grant Foreman's great studies of the Indian, which are important contributions to the newer study of American history. It was Wah'Kon-Tah, written by a gracious Oklahoma Indian author who had studied at Oxford, and selected as a Book of the Month, which made the Press an integral part of Oklahoma life.

The history of the Press should demonstrate, I think, that regional publishing has a very definite place in American life. Probably no book has been issued in recent years which has obtained such universal praise as a contribution to literature as has Mr. Mathews's Wah'Kon-Tah. Dr. Charles N. Gould's Oklahoma Place Names might, at first blush, appear very local, but it is curious to note that it has had a national reception; and if a score of letters to us from a score of states indicate anything, it is that we may expect in the next few years a number of similar books dealing with the origins of the place names in other states.

Despite the severe restrictions of budgets and the demands on

the available funds made by our regular series, we have tried to keep the Press an elastic institution. It must always be justified on the basis of the service it gives the people of the state. Such a social consciousness actuated the publication of our new books dealing with various phases of economics, from the serious study of John Bertwell Ewing on Job Insurance to the vigorous and vital Our Economic Revolution of Arthur B. Adams, in which the funeral oration of the laissez-faire theory is delivered and the prelude for orderly governmental control of industry outlined.

The Press regards the Southwest, or more accurately, the Southwestern part of the old Louisiana country, as its region. On January 15, 1934, the Press publishes what should be of the greatest interest to the Southwest, an entirely new study of the Louisiana Purchase: Louisiana in French Diplomacy, 1759-1804, by E. Wilson Lyon, assistant professor of history in Colgate University. On that same day, the Press releases No More Unemployed, a practical supplementary plan evolved by John B. Cheadle, Howard O. Eaton, and Cortez A. M. Ewing, all of the University faculty, for putting idle plants and idle laborers to work. On February 15 the first editorial work of Stanley Vestal (W. S. Campbell) will be reissued as part of "The Civilization of the American Indian" series, Early Days Among the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians by John H. Seger. This was published as a paper-bound bulletin by the University in 1924 and it has been out of print for a number of years. Seger was the founder of the town of Colony, Oklahoma, and an Indian agent. The spring list will be concluded with The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic, by Miss Angie Debo of Canyon, Texas, to be published March 15 as a part of the Indian series.

Our national culture should be all the richer when good books are published, not alone in New York, Boston, and Chicago, but wherever a vital part of our national area feels the need of expressing itself. It was a sign of intellectual poverty for us to depend for our books on New York alone; it is a sign of new and better days for us to take our books as seriously as we do our news-

papers, and make their publishing and distribution a matter of local as well as national concern.